CONGRESS AS PUBLIC ENEMY

Public attitudes toward American political institutions

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Introduction: What is wrong with the American political system?

The voices of citizens matter in a democracy, but understanding what these voices are truly saying is difficult. We know that the American public in the 1990s holds the political system, and the institutions composing it, in astonishingly low regard. We also know that people, outside of a temporary honeymoon with the 104th Congress and its new partisan majority, are especially disgusted with Congress. The reason for these negative feelings is much less clear. If we are to understand what citizens are saying, however, we must determine what lies behind their antipathy. We pursue this task in the pages that follow. Our primary thesis is that dissatisfaction with the political system and especially Congress is due in no small part to public perceptions of the *processes* involved. As will become apparent, some aspects of these allegedly flawed governing processes are of the sort that could be improved through the adoption of certain political reforms, but other aspects are endemic to open democratic government. That the people of the United States, a country often viewed as the initiator of modern democratic government, have an aversion to democratic processes may sound absurd to many, and perhaps obvious to a few, but we ask for patience as we develop the evidence and logic behind this contention and as we append the necessary caveats and qualifications.

The public's negativity toward the political system and Congress has reached the saturation point. It pours forth with only the slightest provocation and has been duly recorded by countless political observers. In fact, these sentiments have been so much a part of the recent scene that only the briefest sampling is needed here. The title and first few paragraphs of a 1991 *Washington Post* article include these words and phrases: "an electorate ready to revolt," "anger," "frustration," "crisis of confidence," a political system "under indictment," "crisis of confidence" (again), "disaffection," "anxiety," "decline of confidence" (for

variety), "disillusionment," "government off track," "frustrations," and "further frustrations" (for good measure) (Balz & Morin, 1991).

The *Post* is hardly alone. A feature article in the *Atlantic Monthly* begins by noting that "from the term-limitation movement to the rise of Ross Perot, the signs of discontent with the political status quo are everywhere" (Lind, 1992). The Institute of Governmental Studies at the University of California, Berkeley, hosted a workshop in 1992 organized around the question, "What is Wrong with American Political Institutions?" The institute's director, Nelson Polsby, begins his recap of the workshop by noting the "rising tide of dissatisfaction with the functioning of the American political system" (1991: 1). Alan Ehrenhalt writes that "it is hard to find anyone in America these days who does not believe that something has gone wrong with the country's political system. Anger and frustration seem to spill out the moment politics comes up in casual conversation" (1991: xviii).

The title of E. J. Dionne, Jr.'s book on the topic is *Why Americans Hate Politics* (1991). The widely cited report of the Kettering Foundation sees the situation as so bleak that "the challenge before us today is to reconnect citizens and politics – to find a place for citizens in the political process" (1991). *Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report*, a publication not usually given to hyperbole, refers to "tidal waves of discontent" (Hook, 1990: 2473). And *Time* reports that the major message being sent by the people these days is "a blunt and resounding 'no'! No to the lies and intrigues of Washington, no to spending by politicians who can't be trusted with the public's dollars, no to a money greased political system dedicated to self-preservation rather than leadership" (Gibbs, 1990: 32).

While it is difficult to locate a portion of the political system currently held in high esteem, it is not difficult to locate the focal point of the alleged public unrest. It is, fittingly, the first branch of government, the U.S. Congress. The initial report of the joint American Enterprise Institute and Brookings Institution effort to renew Congress begins by stating simply: "Make no mistake about it: Congress is in trouble" (1992: 2). We are told that people believe Congress is the broken branch, that it is an embattled institution (Ehrenhalt, 1992), that its approval rating among the public is at an all-time low (*Public Perspective*, 1992: 86–87), that Congress faces "a wave of public criticism that is unprecedented in recent memory" (Uslaner, 1992: 1), and that "the public hates Congress" (Broder & Morin, 1994). "That the people are angry at Congress is abundantly clear," writes James J. Kirkpatrick (1992: 19).

To be sure, support for Congress increased in the early months of 1995. The 1994 midterm election radically changed the partisan makeup of Congress, and changed the majority party in the House of Represen-

tatives for the first time in forty years. The public's willingness to give the new regime a decent chance, combined with that regime's own rhetoric about enacting major changes in a short, one-hundred-day period, led to a predictable upsurge in public support for Congress. Tellingly, however, virtually no one expected this situation to last. Instead, it was widely anticipated that before long, approval ratings for Congress would return to the dismal levels evident in the early 1990s.

Is this sense of gloom produced solely by inordinate attention to the views of uninformed populist agitators? Hardly. Thomas E. Mann, director of governmental studies at Brookings, believes the legitimacy of the institution of Congress has been eroded, "especially within the political class" (Cohen, 1992: 119). Members of Congress themselves tend to be the most critical (see, for example, Craig, 1993: chapter 5) and those members who have already left Congress are often the most caustic of all (see, for example, Hibbing, 1982). Dennis Hertel (D.-Mich.) retired from the House in 1992, saying he was "angry and frustrated with Congress." Lawrence Coughlin (R.-Penn.) also retired in 1992, citing a "demeaned" Congress. Their fellow retiree, Edward Feighan (D.-Ohio), explained his decision by referring to "a small group of partisan extremists who have set out to destroy the institution" (all quoted in Katz, 1992). Thus, criticisms are not being made solely out of a desire to improve chances in the next election campaign (what Fenno, 1975, refers to as running for Congress by running against Congress).

It is now common practice, both for those retiring from Congress and for those staying, to complain about the hectic pace, the difficulty of passing legislation, the lack of comity among members, shrill demands from the people, the demanding interest groups, the intrusive media, and the byzantine, balkanized legislative process (for the complaints of sitting members, see the hearings of the Joint Committee on the Organization of Congress, 1993). Alas, House Republicans' 1995 success in eliminating three minor committees and a few dozen subcommittees was hardly sufficient to alter these perceptions. Perhaps the most jarring statement on the plight of Congress came when William Gray (D.-Penn.), who held one of the more powerful positions in the House as majority whip, explained his decision to leave Congress by noting that he wanted to make a difference in society. It used to be that people entered Congress because they wanted to make a difference; now it appears that some leave for the same reason.

So, virtually everyone – insiders and outsiders alike – seems to be upset with our national political institutions and particularly with Congress. The unrest may appear most intense outside the beltway, but many Washingtonians also are sincerely disappointed with the current functioning of the political system. Discontent seems ubiquitous. Indeed, as

we were writing this book, people would occasionally ask us what we were doing. Our answer, that we were attempting to determine what the public really thought about Congress and the other political institutions, nearly always drew a reaction something like this: "Why do you need to study that? Everyone knows people hate Congress and politics. What more needs to be said?"

It will come as no surprise that we believe much more needs to be said, largely because – and this is a surprise – so little has been said to date. Plenty of recorded thoughts are relevant, and we will mention many of these, but no one has adequately tackled the nature and reasons for public disaffection. More specifically, it is our belief that the best approach to understanding public dissatisfaction with the political system is to analyze public reactions to key parts of that system; namely, institutions. Moreover, we believe that an appreciation of the public's attitudes toward these individual institutions is important in and of itself. We need to know, for example, what the public thinks about Congress and why. It is not the case that everybody "hates" Congress. Hate is neither a very specific nor, as we shall argue, a very accurate term in this context. Further, Congress and the other political institutions are structurally and functionally multifaceted, and people, as it turns out, vary widely in their perceptions of and attitudes toward the different parts both of Congress and of the rest of the political system, often hating some parts while feeling a good deal less hostile toward others.

Obtaining an accurate fix on people's attitudes toward diverse components of diverse political institutions is not a well-mapped task. Accordingly, previous research has adopted numerous approaches. Many of these, particularly those of a more focused (on a single institution) and technical bent, will be described in the next chapter. In the remainder of this chapter, we are thus free to summarize several more general and often more impressionistic accounts of the public's problems with the entire political system. A primary motivation in enumerating these is to communicate the diversity of explanations for why people allegedly despise their own political system.

We argue that major reasons for the disparate and speculative nature of these explanations are the absence of good data and good theory pertaining to public attitudes toward political institutions. Survey questions on political institutions have usually been superficial, poorly worded, posed sporadically, or accompanied by inadequate or nonexistent background questions. Existing theory is no better than existing data. The main theoretical insight available to organize expectations and findings pertaining to public perceptions of political institutions is the distinction between specific support (support for particular decisions or policies, for example) and more diffuse support (that not contingent

upon recent events). This insight, we argue, is somewhat misleading; but even if it were not, it hardly constitutes an appropriate theoretical framework for a task as important as putting into perspective the public's views of core governmental structures.

Our goal is, first, to provide suitable data on public perceptions of and attitudes toward Congress and the other federal political institutions. We adopt an institutionally oriented approach in which data are obtained on public attitudes toward individual political institutions rather than on the political system as a whole. Second, using data unique to each institution, we will then construct a more complete theory of popular political support in the United States. This theory, in turn, should allow more meaningful interpretations of the current "crisis of confidence" in American political institutions. Absent the needed theory and data, interpretations of the current unrest are likely to be all over the map – and this is just what we discover to be the case.

WHY THE CRISIS OF CONFIDENCE IN THE POLITICAL SYSTEM?

Attention to the current crisis of confidence has become so widespread that suggested explanations run rampant. The range of these general explanations is practically unlimited, with many of them being contradictory or at least noncumulative. They often lack systematic evidence. Nonetheless, these explanations on occasion have a ring of truth that should not be ignored. We provide a brief summary of the key tenets of several explanations, thus helping set the stage for our own analysis. The explanations we examine differ in terms of what the perceived problem is and who or what is the cause of it. Are citizens themselves to blame? Has the government lost touch with the electorate? Have politicians lost all credibility? Is the political system itself simply not working anymore? We try to gain a handle on explanations of public unrest by focusing on four targets of blame: politicians and the media, government policies, political processes, and the citizens themselves.

Politicians and the media

Some explanations of the current crisis of confidence point the finger of blame both at politicians (primarily, it is important to note, simply for being politicians) and also at the media (for inflaming negative feelings in the general public). Disagreement exists, however, over which politicians are to blame, over how long people have been disgusted, and over the precise role the media play in all of this.

First, some people argue that the problem is with politicians in gen-

eral, as is evident in the fact that citizens have disliked them almost forever. Evidence supporting this view can be found easily. Historically, people have liked to dislike politicians, and especially members of Congress. Enduring public derision is part of the politician's job, and negative comments about Congress and politicians have been made throughout U.S. history. Survey data also support this view. For example, Gallup data indicate that in the mid- and late 1940s, few people believed Congress was doing a good job (usually around 15 to 25 percent of respondents). Data from the early 1950s show that approximately 70 percent of survey respondents said that term limits for members of Congress were a good idea, which very closely matches public support for term limits when the issue exploded on the scene in the late 1980s (see Ladd, 1990).

If people have historically disliked politicians, according to this view, then the current lack of confidence is in many ways simply a continuation of a historical trend. What has changed, however, is the tone with which the media cover politics and politicians. The media persistently and eagerly broadcast every misstep by every member of Congress and publicize every negative poll result. This coverage may eventually have convinced the public that politicians really are much worse than in earlier times and that the political system itself is in need of reform. Glenn Parker laments that "congressional unpopularity is often treated by the mass media and political observers as a malady in desperate need of remedy," when in fact "we should expect congressional performance to receive low marks" (1981: 32). The implication is that, while lack of public esteem for politics and politicians may not be something we can ignore, we certainly should not overreact to chronic disappointments with the understandable failure of politicians to please everyone all the time. And the negative media coverage has not changed people's basic support for the political system. The public gives the core constitutional design high marks and thinks that the U.S. system of government is basically sound (Roper, February 1981 polls, cited in Lipset & Schneider, 1987: 385).

A related explanation also includes politicians and the media, but puts a different spin on the current unrest. People who subscribe to this view say that the problem, a recent one, is the widespread decline in confidence in leaders of a wide variety of institutions, only some of which are political. This decline was caused, perhaps, by events such as the Vietnam War, but more likely by the media's portrayal of the inability of institutional leaders to handle important problems facing the nation.

According to this explanation, something fundamental did in fact change in recent years, thereby causing a general loss of public faith in America's leaders whether they be in government, medicine, the military,

higher education, business, labor, organized religion, or the media. The evidence accumulated by proponents of this view, including Lipset and Schneider (1987) and Harris (1987), is impressive in many ways. Lipset and Schneider, for example, rely on survey questions that asked people about their confidence in the leaders of ten "institutions" ranging from medicine to labor to political institutions. As will be seen in more detail in Chapter 2, they find that confidence in these leaders has indeed taken a nosedive since the mid 1960s, dropping from an average of 47 percent to 27 percent between 1967 and 1971 (1987: 50). Part of this decline was due to decreased confidence in leaders of political institutions, including the leaders of Congress (falling from 41 to 19 percent), of the executive branch (dropping from 37 to 23 percent), and of the Supreme Court (dropping from 40 to 23 percent). But confidence in all but two nongovernmental institutions fell a strikingly similar amount.

What is the cause of this decline in confidence? Since dissatisfaction was not targeted solely at the leaders of political institutions, the search for causes of the decline naturally is directed toward nonpolitical explanations. Lipset and Schneider, after considering several possibilities, in the end cite media presentations of the inability of institutions such as the firm, the government, the family, and the professions to handle problems like race relations, the Vietnam War, the economy, and the social climate as the cause of the broad-based disillusionment. So leaders of political institutions are culpable, but no more than other societal leaders (1987: 399–406).

Regardless of the precise argument made, proponents of these explanations see some kind of interaction between politicians and the media's reportage of politicians' actions as the key to understanding unrest. Members of the media play a role by emphasizing the bad and playing down the good, while politicians play a role by providing plenty of raw material for the media.

Government policies

A second type of explanation, as popular as the first, holds that the government has increasingly pursued policies discordant with the public's wishes. The public reacts not only by feeling dissatisfied about policy options, but also by feeling distrustful of the government. William Gamson says distrust of the government arises out of "the nature of the decisions made and the satisfaction or dissatisfaction with them" (1968: 178). But proponents of this view are fundamentally at odds over whether the government is too centrist or too extremist in its policies.

Arthur Miller (1974), for example, argues that the decreased trust people feel toward government stems from their perception that neither

major party represents their policy views. When people feel strongly about a particular policy yet can find no party that reflects their view, they become disaffected with the two parties and with the political system itself. A Democrat may, in the past, have disliked the policy stands of the Republican party, but at least the Democratic party closely approximated his or her policy stands. Beginning in the late 1960s, however, as the electorate polarized, this same person came to see no viable alternative in either party, thereby losing trust in government itself. The parties were too similar and centrist at a time when the public held more extreme views on many political issues. Government policies, in essence, were too middle-of-the-road.

Jack Citrin, in his rejoinder to Miller, questions the implications of decreased trust in the political system, but says that he "accepts Miller's main conclusion that *policy-related* discontent is a source of political cynicism" (1974: 974; our emphasis). He further argues, however, that this dissatisfaction then becomes focused on incumbents who have made the policies rather than on the political system and its values. He also does not accept Miller's argument that the government needs to pursue more extremist policies. He instead makes the point that, regardless of the ideological orientation of particular policies, people may become cynical because government officials promise too much and deliver too little.

E. J. Dionne, Jr., in his influential book *Why Americans Hate Politics*, also argues that the public is upset because of undesirable government policies; but, in direct contradiction to Miller, Dionne believes people think the policy options are too extremist. According to Dionne, Americans' hatred of politics stems from the spokespersons of the major political parties and the major ideologies in the United States being too extreme and dichotomous in their views, and therefore out of step with the vast majority of Americans, who are basically centrists at heart. The present ideological and party apparatus in the United States pushes us toward negative campaigning, banalities, artificially dichotomous choices, and unnecessary polarization. Both the Left and the Right are busy fighting their own internecine battles, and the public is left out. The two major parties (Democratic and Republican) and the two major ideologies (liberalism and conservatism) simply fail to speak for modern America, according to this view.

"What is required to end America's hatred of politics is an organizing idea that simultaneously accepts the efficiencies of markets and the importance of a vigorous public life" (Dionne, 1991: 354). Dionne's view of the present situation is obviously that liberals have been too slow to appreciate the benefits of the market, while conservatives have been too slow to recognize that the effects of the market need to be softened by

some sort of benevolent public presence. As a result, according to Dionne, the legacy of the past thirty years is "a polarized politics that highlights symbolic issues, short-circuits genuine political debate, [and] gives discontent few real outlets" (1991: 323).

Morris Fiorina also believes people are often frustrated by the need to make choices between what he terms "San Francisco Democrats," whom many perceive to be the party of "minorities, gay rights activists, radical feminists, and peaceniks," and "Reagan Republicans," the party of "fundamentalists, bigots, pro-life activists, and chicken-hawks" (1992: 74). Craving something in between, the public acts in ways that divide government control between these two undesired extremes.

Whether government policies are too extremist, as Dionne and Fiorina argue, or too centrist, as Miller argues was true in the late 1960s, the public is seen as being less than happy with the policy options being offered by the government and opposition, and therefore as disaffected with politics. If the government could better represent the policy interests of the American people, then trust in government would increase and the people would once again like politics.

Public shut out of the political process

A third and rarer view argues that public dissatisfaction and discontent stem from the public's sense that it is shut out of the political process. Yet there are disagreements over what has led to the perceived exclusion of citizens from the public sphere. One explanation points to the "Washington system" and another to the increased professionalization and institutionalization of Congress.

According to the widely cited Kettering Foundation Report, issued in 1991, the American people are dissatisfied because they have been shut out of the political process by Washington insiders, careerist politicians, and special interests who now seem to control the political system itself. The basic message of the report is that the American public, far from being apathetic or uninterested in politics, is actually eager to get involved. Unfortunately, the public is estranged from the political system. The governing system is perceived to be big, alien, and out of their control.

Is this a recent phenomenon? The answer to this question is unclear, although evidence from several focus-group sessions around the country indicates that participants in the Kettering study felt that the political process had moved away from ordinary citizens. Many participants stressed the role of political action committees (PACs), extremists, special interests, and careerist politicians, so presumably the increased visibility of these entities is a factor. Another possibility is that the increased

population in the United States and the growth in the size of the government have made people feel as if no one is listening to them anymore. The key point, however, is that according to this view the political process has, for some largely unspecified reason, spun out of the control of ordinary citizens and become the servant of nefarious special interests. People try to be contributing, politically involved citizens, but believe they have been shut out of the political process due to the nature of the system itself. According to this view, the political process has failed us.

An alternative and in some ways complementary explanation holds that people have been shut out of the system by the increased professionalization of politicians and institutionalization of Congress. Congress has become a world unto itself, a world the public does not like. Alan Ehrenhalt, author of *The United States of Ambition*, believes the main source of the problem in the minds of the public is the absence of citizen-politicians. In their place we find political offices dominated by "a careerist elite whose lifetime political preoccupation has separated them from most people" (1991: xx). Of course professional politicians are only part of a professionalized political system.

In Nelson Polsby's (1968) well-known formulation, professionalization, or institutionalization as it is sometimes called, consists of increasing complexity, boundedness, and devotion to standard operating procedures. In an institutionalized Congress, members stay longer, leaders are increasingly required to serve a long apprenticeship period within the Congress (unlike Henry Clay, who was made Speaker of the House the first day he served), the number of staff assistants has increased, committees have more clout and permanence, norms and rules of the game are more apparent, and the existence of elaborate congressional infrastructures, consisting of eateries, barbershops, and support agencies, all mushroomed. All this is a far cry from the lonely citizen-legislator who served to promote the commonweal and did not benefit from six-figure salaries, perquisites, special parking places, scores of doting staffers, and stable and lengthy career paths. Most citizens of today are not at all fond of either professional politicians or big, professional political institutions, and both contribute to a hatred of politics.[1]

According to these views, the public's disaffection is due to the polit-

1 But Ehrenhalt argues persuasively that the problem in actuality is not that politicians have lost touch with the American people, because we see "legislators dashing home every weekend for luncheons and forums and town meetings," "members taking polls on every conceivable subject and then shrinking from any action that fails to command at least 51 percent approval," and "legislators mired in weeks of embarrassing deadlock because they fear the electoral consequences of either reducing public services or imposing the taxes those services require" (1991: xiii–xiv). It is possible to see the members of Congress as being too close to the people (see also Will, 1992).

ical process itself. People believe that the way politics is currently run ignores the common person. Only Washington denizens such as ossified members of Congress and special-interest puppets have a say in what is going on in the country, and the public is increasingly kept out of the political process.

Citizens

Finally, it can be argued that while the current problem with government is its inability to get anything done, the real blame does not fall on politicians, policies, or the political process. Rather, the blame actually falls on citizens themselves, who often make contradictory and unreasonable demands while not doing what it takes to fix the perceived problems. The evidence supporting such an argument is abundant. People generally do not pay much attention to politics, and they participate irregularly if at all. Many people do not know the names of their members of Congress and are usually unable to recall a single position taken by a member on a substantive policy matter (see Miller & Stokes, 1963). Barely half of the eligible electorate votes, even in presidential elections, and turnout in midterm, local, and primary elections is substantially lower. People seem much more willing to complain than to try to correct the problems.

Moreover, it often seems as though the demands made by the public are unrealistic. Citizens decry pork-barrel politics in general but are delighted when their own representative is successful in playing the game. They hate negative campaigning but are taken in by it. They complain because politicians do not listen to them and in practically the same breath complain that politicians are captives of polls and lack the backbone required to demonstrate true leadership. People become angry with politicians for not balancing the budget but do not want to pay the price in higher taxes, reduced services, or both, to do so. If people would take their citizen responsibilities seriously and be reasonable, according to this view, then many of the problems facing the nation today could more readily be solved by politicians who, after all, are supposed to be responsive to public desires.

PROBLEMS WITH EXISTING THEORIES

To be sure, the explanations presented are caricatures, and many of the works we have associated with them are richer and do a better job of acknowledging the validity of other explanations than is suggested by our brief discussion. Still, we think a fair reading of recent literature and commentary does reveal that the crux of the problem is seen quite dif-

ferently by different people. It is obvious that the thrust of various explanations is inconsistent with, perhaps contradictory to, at least some of the others. What, then, can we conclude about public disgust toward politics? Not a great deal.

That these explanations are all over the board points to two major problems faced by anyone trying to understand people's attitudes toward the political system. First, the data available on these attitudes are limited at best. We will discuss problems with data more thoroughly in Chapter 2. For now, suffice it to say that popular explanations of public disgust are based on less than exemplary data; usually some combination of a casual reading of historical trends, sporadic and often limited survey data, unsystematic focus-group responses, and varied experiences with and within the current political system constitute the evidence collected to support these explanations. Making progress in understanding public disaffection depends on having better data.

Second, we also need better theory to guide research on public attitudes toward the political system, and this point deserves to be addressed immediately. Analysts turning to political science in hopes of finding a theoretical framework for understanding the current public unrest must be sorely disappointed by what they find, or rather do not find. The only theory in political science that directly addresses political-system support is found in the work of David Easton (1965a,b). Easton envisions a political system with inputs in the form of demands and support. The system processes these demands and support in a fashion unspecified by the theory, with the result being policy outputs. These outputs, in turn, affect subsequent demands and support via a feedback loop.

Problems with diffuse and specific support

In discussing support as an input (in truth, support is not an input at all but a trait that can condition how inputs are handled), Easton draws a distinction between diffuse and specific support. This distinction has become the essence of the theoretical base for research on attitudes toward the political system. Diffuse support is support "that continues independently of the specific rewards which the member [of the polity] may feel he obtains from belonging to the system" (1965a: 125). Specific support, as might be expected, is "a return for the specific benefits and advantages that members of a system experience as part of their membership. It represents or reflects the satisfaction a member feels when he perceives his demands as having been met" (1965a: 125).

The distinction between diffuse and specific support raises some serious concerns. First, as Craig argues, Easton's theoretical distinction be-